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AUTHOR Loukas, Helen Franzwa
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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews a number of studies of the portrayal of blacks and other minorities on television. Statistics and conclusions drawn from these studies are used to illustrate the argument that: (1) minorities are either excluded, presented as tokens on otherwise all white shows, or concentrated in large numbers on a relatively few shows; and (2) the portrayals of minorities on network television are stereotyped. Samples of these portrayals are provided and the impact of these portrayals on both blacks and whites, particularly children, is discussed. (Author/EB)

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"BLACKS IN TELEVISION: LET'S OPEN THE WINDOW"

HELEN FRANZWA LOUKAS
PROJECT DIRECTOR
EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN TELEVISION STUDY
U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS

A SPEECH PRESENTED TO THE URBAN LEAGUE CONFERENCE:
"BLACK FAMILIES: A SOURCE OF NATIONAL STRENGTH"

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HOW ARE BLACKS AND OTHER MINORITIES PORTRAYED ON NETWORK TELEVISION ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMS? THAT WAS ONE OF MANY QUESTIONS THE U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS EXPLORED IN ITS RECENT STUDY OF WOMEN AND MINORITIES IN TELEVISION, "WINDOW DRESSING ON THE SET." TO STUDY THIS ISSUE WE ANALYZED DATA OBTAINED FROM THE ANNENBERG SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATIONS IN PHILADELPHIA FOR THE YEARS 1969 THROUGH 1974. ALTHOUGH THE NUMBER OF MINORITY CHARACTERS ALMOST DOUBLED DURING THAT TIME PERIOD--FROM 6.6 PERCENT TO 12.5 PERCENT OF ALL CHARACTERS--THE PORTRAYAL OF MINORITIES CONTINUES TO SUFFER IN TWO DISTINCT WAYS.

FIRST: MINORITIES ARE EITHER EXCLUDED, PRESENTED AS TOKENS ON OTHERWISE ALL-WHITE SHOWS, OR CONCENTRATED IN LARGE NUMBERS ON A RELATIVELY FEW SHOWS.

SECOND: THE PORTRAYALS ARE STEREOTYPED.

LET ME START WITH SOME STATISTICS THAT WILL ILLUSTRATE MY FIRST POINT. IN 1973 BLACKS AND OTHER MINORITIES DID NOT APPEAR IN 42 PERCENT OF THE PRIMETIME PROGRAMS IN OUR SAMPLE. THEY WERE TOKENS IN AN ADDITIONAL 25 PERCENT OF THE SHOWS. FINALLY, 54 PERCENT--OVER ½--OF ALL THE MINORITY CHARACTERS WERE CONCENTRATED ON ONLY 5 PROGRAMS, OR 8 ½ PERCENT OF THE TOTAL.

IN 1974 THINGS HADN'T IMPROVED MUCH. BLACKS AND OTHER MINORITIES WERE ABSENT FROM 37 PERCENT OF PRIMETIME SHOWS AND THEY APPEARED AS TOKENS ON 27 PERCENT OF THEM. FINALLY, 56 PERCENT OF ALL MINORITIES APPEARING ON THE PROGRAMS IN OUR SAMPLE WERE SEEN IN ONLY 8 PROGRAMS, OR 13 ½ PERCENT OF THE SAMPLE.

ANOTHER STUDY OF TELEVISION, USING A SAMPLE OF PROGRAMS BROADCAST IN 1975, HAD RESULTS SUGGESTING GREATER EXCLUSION OF MINORITIES. RESEARCHERS CHARLES ATKIN AND BRADLEY GREENBERG FROM MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY FOUND THAT BLACKS WERE ABSENT FROM 60 PERCENT OF THE PROGRAMS IN THEIR SAMPLE. PEOPLE OF SPANISH ORIGIN WERE ABSENT FROM 92 PERCENT. BLACKS APPEARED AS TOKENS IN 19 PERCENT OF THE SHOWS AND IN EIGHT PROGRAMS THERE WERE FIVE OR MORE BLACKS PER PROGRAM. ATKIN AND GREENBERG CONCLUDED THAT WHEN BLACKS ARE NOT APPEARING IN TOKEN ROLES, THEY TYPICALLY APPEAR "PRIMARILY IN A MINORITY CONTEXT."

THESE FINDINGS ARE FROM PROGRAMS BROADCAST IN 1973, 1974 AND 1975. "AREN'T THESE DATA TOO OLD?" YOU MIGHT ASK. "THINGS HAVE IMPROVED!" YOU MIGHT CLAIM. (WELL, YOU MIGHT NOT MAKE THIS CLAIM, BUT THE NETWORKS HAVE.) WHEN "WINDOW DRESSING" WAS RELEASED IN AUGUST IT RECEIVED ENORMOUS PRESS COVERAGE, MUCH OF IT NEGATIVE. ONE OF THE POINTS THAT WAS ALWAYS STRESSED WAS THE NETWORK CLAIM THAT OUR DATA WERE TOO OLD AND THAT THE PORTRAYAL OF BLACKS HAS IMPROVED.

THERE WAS ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW THAT DID NOT RECEIVE SUCH WIDE-SPREAD COVERAGE. INDEED, IT APPEARED ONLY IN VARIETY, A TRADE PUBLICATION. AN ARTICLE, ENTITLED " IS THERE A SAG IN MINORITY HIRING?" REPORTED THE RESPONSE OF THE SCREEN ACTORS GUILD TO THE NETWORK CLAIMS. SAG REPLIED THAT YES, THE COMMISSION'S FIGURES ARE TOO OLD. BUT, THEY WENT ON TO SAY, THE SITUATION HAS NOT GOTTEN BETTER; IT HAS GOTTEN WORSE. SUMI HARU, CHAIRPERSON OF THE ETHNIC MINORITIES COMMITTEE OF THE GUILD, NOTED THAT THEIR FIGURES SHOWED A DECREASE IN THE NUMBER OF ROLES AVAILABLE TO

MINORITIES AND WOMEN. HARU WENT ON TO CLAIM THAT IF A SCRIPT DID NOT CALL FOR "A MEMBER OF A PARTICULAR RACE--A LAWYER FOR INSTANCE--...ONLY WHITES ARE INVITED TO APPLY." NORMA CONNOLLY, CHAIRPERSON OF THE WOMEN'S COMMITTEE OF SAG, SAID THE SAME THING HAPPENS TO ACTRESSES: "IN REAL LIFE," SHE SAID, "YOU FIND WOMEN LAWYERS PRACTICING, BUT IF THE SCRIPT DOESN'T SPECIFY THAT THE ROLE MUST GO TO A WOMAN, IN CASTING THEY'LL ASK FOR MEN."

ONE OF THE REASONS THE COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS CONDUCTED ITS STUDY OF THE PORTRAYAL OF MINORITIES AND WOMEN WAS BECAUSE OF TELEVISION'S IMPACT ON VIEWERS' ATTITUDES. IF MINORITIES AND WOMEN ARE PORTRAYED IN STEREOTYPED WAYS--WHEN THEY AREN'T EXCLUDED FROM THE SCREEN--STEREOTYPED ATTITUDES WILL BE PERPETUATED AND REINFORCED. LET US TAKE JUST ONE EXAMPLE OF PORTRAYAL--THE OCCUPATION OR JOB THAT THE CHARACTER HAS IN THE TELEPLAY.

IN THE SHOWS IN THE 1974 SAMPLE 14 BLACKS APPEARED AS TOKENS, THAT IS, ONLY ONE BLACK IN AN OTHERWISE ALL-WHITE SHOW. TWO WERE LITTLE GIRLS; ONE WAS A SALESWOMAN. THE 11 MEN WERE SEEN IN FOUR SERVICE JOBS: BARTENDER, BUTLER, WAITER AND HOTEL CLERK; THERE WAS ONE DOCTOR, ONE PARK RANGER AND--FIVE POLICE OFFICERS.

THE SHOW IN WHICH LARGE NUMBERS OF BLACKS APPEARED WERE EITHER ACTION SHOWS OR SITUATION COMEDIES. IN THE ACTION SHOWS THE MEN WERE ALMOST ALWAYS CROOKS (8) OR COPS (4). IN ALMOST EVERY SHOW WITH BLACK CRIMINALS THERE WAS A BLACK POLICE OFFICER TO BRING THEM TO JUSTICE. THE BLACK WOMEN IN THESE SHOWS WERE EITHER GIRL FRIENDS WITH NO VISIBLE MEANS OF INDEPENDENT SUPPORT (2) OR PROSTITUTES (5). THE ONLY EXCEPTION WAS A NURSE.

IN THE SITUATION COMEDIES, THE MEN PLAYED SUCH FAMILIAR ROLES AS SANFORD AND HIS SONE (JUNK DEALERS), CLIFTON CURTIS AND EARL (A BARBER AND A POSTMAN) AND JAMES EVANS (CARWASH ATTENDANT). BOTH MAMA CURTIS AND FLORIDA EVANS APPEARED AS HOUSEWIVES.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF SUCH PORTRAYALS ON BLACKS--AND ON WHITES? WE DON'T KNOW AS MUCH AS WE SHOULD. BUT WE DO KNOW THIS:

(1) BLACKS OF ALL AGES WATCH MORE TELEVISION THAN WHITES;

(2) BLACKS ARE MORE LIKELY THAN WHITES TO WATCH PROGRAMS FEATURING BLACKS;

(3) BLACK CHILDREN IDENTIFY WITH BLACK TELEVISION CHARACTERS.

IF THESE FINDINGS ARE CORRECT THEN WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON BLACK CHILDREN OF SEEING BLACK ADULTS PORTRAYED SO FREQUENTLY AS POLICE OFFICERS, AS CRIMINALS, AND IN A VARIETY OF SERVICE ROLES? WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON BLACK GIRLS WHO SEE ADULT BLACK WOMEN WHO ARE MOSTLY UNEMPLOYED AND WHO ARE FREQUENTLY PROSTITUTES? WHAT IS THE EFFECT ON CHILDREN OF OTHER MINORITY GROUPS WHO RARELY SEE ADULTS OF THEIR OWN ETHNIC BACKGROUND PORTRAYED ON TELEVISION AT ALL?

THE IMPACT ON WHITE CHILDREN OF TELEVISION PORTRAYALS OF BLACKS IS ALSO IMPORTANT, FOR WHITE CHILDREN ARE MORE LIKELY THAN BLACK CHILDREN TO LEARN ABOUT THE OTHER RACE FROM TELEVISION. IN ONE STUDY, FORTY PERCENT OF THE WHITE CHILDREN ATTRIBUTED THEIR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HOW BLACKS LOOK, TALK. AND DRESS TO TELEVISION. THOSE WHITE CHILDREN WHO HAD THE LEAST OPPORTUNITY TO INTERACT WITH BLACKS WERE MOST LIKELY TO BELIEVE THAT TELEVISION PORTRAYALS OF BLACKS ARE REALISTIC. THUS, TELEVISION IS TEACHING MANY WHITES WHAT TO BELIEVE ABOUT BLACKS.

MUCH MORE RESEARCH ON THIS SUBJECT NEEDS TO BE CONDUCTED. BUT I AM HAPPY TO REPORT THAT TWO MAJOR STUDIES ON THE IMPACT OF TELEVISION'S PORTRAYALS OF BLACKS WILL SOON BE RELEASED. THE MICHIGAN STATE STUDY THAT I MENTIONED EARLIER IS EXPLORING, AMONG OTHER THINGS, THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE NUMBER OF PROGRAMS FEATURING BLACKS THAT CHILDREN OF BOTH RACES WATCH AND THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARD BLACK CHARACTERS AND WILLINGNESS TO IDENTIFY WITH THEM. THE REPORT WILL BE RELEASED EARLY NEXT YEAR.

ANOTHER STUDY, CONDUCTED BY WILLIAM WRIGHT AND THE BOOKER TO. WASHINGTON FOUNDATION EXPLORES, AMONG OTHER THINGS, VIEWING HABITS OF BLACKS AND THE BELIEVABILITY OF THE BLACK CHARACTERS IN SUCH PROGRAMS AS "SANFORD AND SON," "GOOD TIMES" AND "THE JEFFERSONS." THIS REPORT IS SCHEDULED TO BE RELEASED THIS MONTH.

A THIRD MAJOR STUDY WAS RECENTLY COMPLETED AS A MASTERS THESIS BY ALLEN HAMMOND, CURRENTLY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND. HAMMOND TESTED AN IDEA FIRST PRESENTED BY CEDRIC CLARK THAT THERE ARE FOUR PHASES IN THE PORTRAYAL OF MINORITIES--EXCLUSION, RIDICULE, REGULATION AND RESPECT. IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WERE NO BLACKS ON TELEVISION, THE "EXCLUSION" PHASE; THE "AMOS 'N' ANDY" PROGRAM OF THE 1950s EXEMPLIFIES THE "RIDICULE" PHASE; THE ACTION SHOWS FEATURING BLACK COPS CATCHING BLACK CROOKS REPRESENTS THE "REGULATORY" PHASE, THE MAINTENANCE OF LAW AND ORDER. FINALLY, THE "RESPECT" PHASE IS SEEN IN THE OCCASIONAL PORTRAYAL OF BLACKS AS DOCTORS, LAWYERS, AND PARK RANGERS. HAMMOND ARGUES, AND I AGREE WITH HIM, THAT THE RESPECT PHASE IS STILL VERY MUCH IN ITS INFANCY. THIS IS TRUE BECAUSE BLACK PROFESSIONALS ARE MOST FREQUENTLY SEEN IN MINOR ROLES, OR AS TOKENS, AND NOT AS CONTINUING CHARACTERS. THERE ISN'T A

SINGLE BLACK LEADING CHARACTER PORTRAYING A PROFESSIONAL IN A DRAMATIC SERIES TODAY.

OF FAR MORE CONCERN, HOWEVER, IS HAMMOND'S CONCLUSION THAT THE PORTRAYAL OF BLACKS HAS RETROGRESSED TO THE RIDICULE STAGE. THIS, HE ARGUES, IS MAINFESTED IN THE STEREOTYPED PORTRAYAL OF BLACKS IN THE VARIOUS SITUATION COMEDIES ON THE AIR TODAY.

I SUGGEST THAT EACH OF YOU TAKE SOME TIME IN THE COMING WEEKS TO WATCH SOME TELEVISION. WATCH IT CAREFULLY AND CRITICALLY. DECIDE FOR YOURSELVES WHETHER OR NOT WHAT YOU SEE IS A GOOD REFLECTION OF YOU. DECIDE FOR YOURSELVES IF THE CHARACTERS BLACKS ARE PORTRAYING PROVIDE GOOD ROLE MODELS FOR YOUR CHILDREN. AND, IF YOU THINK CHANGES ARE IN ORDER, THEN MAKE YOUR WISHES KNOWN TO THOSE WHO ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR PRODUCING AND DISTRIBUTING THESE PROGRAMS--THE NETWORKS AND THE PRODUCTION COMPANIES. RIGHT, NOW, THEY THINK YOU'RE SATISFIED. ARE YOU?

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